

VZCZCXRO9643
PP RUEHROV
DE RUEHTV #2839/01 3531340
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 181340Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9675
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 002839

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAELI ISLAMIC MOVEMENT GAINING INFLUENCE

REF: A) TELAVIV 2534, B) TELAVIV 1081, C) 03 TELAVIV 4397

11. (SBU) Summary: The official goal of the Islamic Movement in Israel is to bring Muslims living in "Palestine of 1948" back to Islam. The Movement has focused its efforts on three primary fronts -- the social, the religious, and the political. While efforts on the political front have been limited by divisions within the Movement itself and by the entrenchment of clan-based politics in Israel's Arab communities (as evidenced in the November 11 municipal elections), the Movement has been somewhat more successful in promoting its Islamic agenda on the social front. By providing its own considerable social services to the underserved Arab sector, the Islamic Movement has begun to create socially self-sufficient Arab communities within Israel. At the same time, the split between the radical Northern Branch, whose leader regularly incites against Zionism and the Israeli government, and the more moderate Southern Branch, which generally values coexistence, continues to limit the Movement's ambitions. END SUMMARY

Origins of the Movement

12. (SBU) The character, goals, and tactics of the Islamic Movement in Israel have changed dramatically over the course of the last thirty-seven years. Sheikh Abdullah Nimr Darwish founded the Islamic Movement of Israel in 1971 as an ideological offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Darwish also founded a separate underground group, Usrat al-Jihad, in 1979. Throughout the 1970s, the Movement gained notoriety due to its underground paramilitary activities, according to Dr. Nohad Ali, an expert on the Islamic Movement at Haifa University. Its goal was to destroy the Israeli economy, and tactics included violent measures such as burning Israeli fields. In 1980, Israeli police jailed several of the Movement's leaders, including Sheikh Darwish. Following his release from prison in 1984, Darwish instructed his followers to employ only lawful activity with a focus on proselytizing, education, and the development of health and welfare programs for Arab communities.

Local Politics and the Radical-Moderate Divide

13. (SBU) During the 1980s and 90s, leaders of the Movement faced a crisis of identity and direction as they sought to define themselves politically within the context of living within a Jewish state. When Sheikh Darwish advocated the Islamic Movement's participation in the 1996 Knesset elections, Sheikh Ra'ed Salah disagreed, and the Movement split into two factions -- the more moderate Southern Branch headed by Darwish, with support primarily in the Negev and parts of the Galilee, and the radical Northern Branch headed by Salah, with support centered in the "Triangle" region bordering the northern West Bank. The Islamic Movement as a whole, including both branches, provides an umbrella over a network of non-governmental organizations and affiliated mosques, and each looks to a different "branch" depending on its political views. (Comment: Describing the Movement as divided into northern and southern factions is somewhat of a false dichotomy, but it does provide a useful short-cut when discussing the Movement and its political division over whether to cooperate with or disassociate itself from the institutions of the

State of Israel. End comment.)

¶4. (SBU) Though he states that he no longer participates in politics, Sheikh Darwish remains the Southern Branch's spiritual leader and is actively involved in both Islamic social outreach and, increasingly, Jewish-Muslim coexistence efforts. Unlike the Northern Branch, the Southern Branch has a clear and generally transparent organizational structure, with a leader, deputy head, and various committees (www.islammov.com). The Southern Branch is currently headed by Member of Knesset Ibrahim Sarsour, head of the four-seat United Arab List in the Knesset, while the more loosely organized Northern Branch remains under the leadership of Ra'ed Salah.

¶5. (SBU) While the Northern Branch participates in municipal politics, it will not contest national elections and does not officially recognize Israel's legitimacy as a state. To the extent possible, it minimizes its interactions with the organs of national government. In the November 11 municipal elections, the Northern Branch held onto the mayoralty and city council in the Triangle's largest town, Umm al-Fahm. Southern Branch-affiliated candidates won or maintained significant representation on the city councils of at least five Israeli Arab towns, plus the politically-important mixed Muslim and Christian city of Nazareth. However, the Southern Branch lost its 20-year grip on the symbolically important town of Kafr Kassem, which was the birthplace of the movement.

¶6. (SBU) The combined results of the two branches' showing in the November 11 municipal elections shows a stagnation or even slight decline in the Islamic Movement's role in local politics for both branches. As a whole, the Movement won fewer council seats and fewer mayoralties this year than in Israel's last municipal

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elections in 2003. Muhannad Mustafa, an expert on Israeli Arab politics at Haifa University, attributed both factions' political difficulties to the rural nature of the Arab communities. He told ConOff that in contrast to nearby places such as the West Bank, Gaza and Egypt, where political Islam has developed deeper roots by capitalizing on the stresses of urbanization, the Islamic Movement in Israel has found it very difficult to gain a stable political foothold in the face of the clan-based politics that still holds sway among Israel's comparatively rural Arab citizens.

¶7. (SBU) In contrast to its limited success in local politics, the Movement is rapidly taking control of the Arab Student Union, the primary incubator of emerging Arab leaders in Israel. In June, the Northern Branch contested the Arab Student Union elections at Tel Aviv University for the first time. Running under the banner of the IQRA International Education Foundation, candidates promised to continue aiding members of the Arab sector in all areas of life. According to Israeli Media, it won in a landslide. In April, the Northern and Southern Branches ran together at Hebrew University under the IQRA banner and won. A few months previous, the Northern Branch ran at Haifa University and defeated the Hadash party, a former communist party comprising Jews, Muslims and Christians, which had previously dominated. IQRA chair Nasim Badarna credited the win at Tel Aviv University to the Islamic Movement's social programs, saying "we knew we'd be able to overpower everyone else, thanks to our hard work years before the election in providing aid to Arab students."

¶8. (SBU) The Islamic Movement remains divided over political ideology. Over time, the Southern Branch has solidified its reputation as the more pragmatic and moderate branch although it too contests the legitimacy of the state. One of its members, MK Abbas Zakoor, has been active in trying to mend the community wounds in Akko following the riots between Jews and Arabs in October. By contrast, the Northern Branch has continued to embrace its headline political positions and radical reputation. The 1999 Rosh Hashanah bombings in Tiberias and Haifa were tied to members of the Northern Branch, and on May 13, 2000, Sheikh Salah was arrested for incitement and for providing human and financial aid to terrorist-linked associations in the Palestinian territories. He served time in prison from 2003 - 2005. Unlike Darwish, however, Salah's time in prison did not have a moderating effect.

Northern Branch and the Al-Aqsa Mosque

¶9. (SBU) The Northern Branch continues to clash with Israeli authorities. For example, in August 2008, Israeli police and security forces raided the headquarters of Sheikh Salah's Al-Aqsa Foundation for the Reconstruction of Islamic Holy Places in Umm al-Fahm. The police confiscated documents, maps, money and fundraising lists, claiming that the Foundation was working in concert with HAMAS. Salah, who has no role with the Islamic Waqf in Jerusalem and whose activities are often frowned upon by Waqf officials, has for years used the Al-Aqsa Foundation as a platform for denouncing Jewish Israelis for their alleged desecrations of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and Al-Aqsa Mosque. In early 2007, he called on Israeli Arabs to rise up and start a third intifada in order to "rescue" Jerusalem from the Jewish state (an act for which he is now facing incitement charges).

¶10. (SBU) Through various media sources including Al-Jazeera and those owned by HAMAS, Salah has worked to spread the idea that the Al-Aqsa Mosque is in danger. Two days before the raid on the Al-Aqsa Foundation, Salah addressed followers gathered at the annual Al-Aqsa festival: "I say to the Israeli occupation... after 40 years that you are occupying the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and digging all sorts of ditches and building synagogues under the mosque... I say to you that your occupation will be removed from above Jerusalem and from the Mosque." Ynet News in Israel also reported that Salah told the crowd that Israelis drank alcohol in the mosque and engaged in sexual activities on its grounds. Dr. Ali told ConOff that nearly 70,000 people attended the Al-Aqsa festival in 2008, and he watched as women donated gold off their wrists into a growing pile, all allegedly for the protection of the mosque. In a conversation with Poloff, Northern Branch Spokesman Zahi Nagidat was adamant that the Israelis were conspiring to destroy Al-Aqsa and replace it with a rebuilt Jewish Temple. He also asserted that "there was no real evidence of an historical Jewish connection to Jerusalem."

Promoting Islam through Social Services

¶11. (SBU) In contrast to its limited success on its divided political front, both branches of the Islamic Movement have met with considerable success on the social front. Both have worked, sometimes together and sometimes separately, to provide a social infrastructure outside the Israeli national system for the under-serviced Arab sector. According to Mustafa, this infrastructure consists of a wide network of kindergartens, clinics,

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ambulances, community centers, libraries, and lecture halls, all at nominal or no cost. In addition, the Movement, including elements of both branches, has established an independent soccer league of 38 teams, opened numerous book stores, and provided opportunities for volunteer activity. Through its charities, the Movement provides assistance to the poor and finances construction of homes demolished by Israeli authorities in the unrecognized Bedouin communities as well as those damaged by Jews during periods of inter-communal violence, such as occurred in Akko in October. The Movement has created numerous local and national non-profit organizations, some of which provide social services and others which serve as fund-raising organizations for Muslim causes. The Movement provides several alternative education programs, including an Islamic college whose student population is more than half female; funding of medical training both in Israel and abroad; and various adult-education courses. It sponsors two newspapers; schools and centers for religious studies; and several religious festivals throughout the year. Thus, apart from its lackluster political status at the local or national level, the Movement is succeeding in creating self-sufficient Islamic communities within the State of Israel.

¶12. (SBU) The Movement's promotion of a return to Islamic law and traditions is closely tied to its success in providing social

services. Most of the social services are provided at community centers that also include mosques. As people come to the community centers to receive social services, they also are expected to hear the messages of the Imam. As the religiously observant community expands, more and more people participate in the religious activities and festivals held at the community centers and their mosques, and more and more people donate what money they are able to the various charities run by the Islamic Movement.

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